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ABSTRACT

As downsizing of government and business organizations has become widespread, many managers are seeking to increase productivity by empowering the workforce. When effectively and appropriately implemented, empowered workforce structures can cut costs and improve quality and safety. Yet resistance to such changes arises from a patriarchal environment predicated on control, consistency, and predictability. Values, personalities, and behaviors are not accessible to consistent and predictable control and may vary widely in a diverse workforce. Employers must make a major leap away from patriarchal systems to stewardship. A four-tier model of empowerment training focuses on context, communication tools, outcomes, and the use of experiences. The context for training involves five commitments by participants: taking full responsibility, speaking the truth, asking for what is needed, paying attention, and honoring agreements. Key communication skills are the giving and receiving of feedback with the five commitments in mind, acknowledgment of specific employee contributions and their impact, and completion (resolving unresolved issues). Desired learning outcomes for members of work teams are listed. Facilitators of the experiences used must set the context, observe verbal and nonverbal details that go unnoticed by the group, hold participants accountable, and direct the discussion. Sample process questions are suggested. (SV)

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Experiential Training for Empowerment of the Workforce

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on eight years' work in the field of developing empowered organizations in the public and private sector. The use of experiential activities is perhaps the ultimate tool for engaging the participation of others because if one is not participating, it shows up so much more clearly in the experiential realm. Participation and honesty are taught for the contemporary context of business and government which is (most often) a transition from patriarchal systems to stewardship. To accomplish this, there must be operating guidelines around which everything is processed. The skills of giving and receiving feedback, acknowledgment of contribution, and communicating to complete interpersonal issues are taught as well. ALL of these fundamentals, the commitments and the skills, are practiced and modeled as the experiential events are engaged to have patterns of behavior "show up" and be examined vis-à-vis the empowerment outcomes.

Government and business organizations alike have downsized, leaving the workforce with an admonishment: "Do more, with less." In a valiant effort to make that turn out well, managers have gone right to the old standby that bureaucracy has given for years as the standard answer to problems — RESTRUCTURE! A new set of reporting relationships inevitably is intended to redirect the corporate energies, and "poof," we have magically inserted more efficiency with a new organizational chart and new divisional or departmental names. Having restructured over and over again, some forward-looking managers took it upon themselves to take the leap of faith as suggested by various management gurus and EMPOWER the workforce. "Participative management is fine, but let's tap the power of people even more," said some, "Let's make our workforce self-directed." In our consulting work over the past eight

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years, the Institute for Organizational Wellness has consulted with every kind of business and government entity seeking to empower, including: manufacturing groups, federal regulatory agencies, a chemical plant, a county social services agency, an outpatient clinic, a Native American reservation, an interdisciplinary college department, and a Canadian provincial agency.

Each type of organization shifting to an empowered workforce approach will have its own identifying characteristics, but there are many things in common. Empowerment has known many monikers: "empowered teams," "self-directed teams," "high-functioning teams," "self-directed workforce" (indicating no TEAMS required), "self-managed colleagues," "gold collar workers," and that matrix management nightmare, "cross-functional project teams." The definition of empowerment varies as does its manifestation in a given agency or company, due to the nature of the work performed. Unfortunately, due to mixed results, empowerment has become (for some) one more management "flavor of the month" buzz word. When effectively and appropriately implemented, empowered workforce structures can:

- cut costs
- improve quality
- enhance safety
- increase productivity
- reduce tiers of hierarchy, improving communication

Yet there is resistance which produces less desirable outcomes than those listed above. Usually, unproductive outcomes emerge because leadership fears that they will have to "give away the store" and anarchy will reign or some of the employees would rather not have the responsibility that goes hand-in-hand with empowerment.

In general, we find challenges with our clients wherever we work to help implement empowerment because most of us have been reared in a

patriarchal environment. In his revolutionary work on empowerment, Peter Block (1993) described the culture of patriarchy as an environment predicated on control, consistency, and predictability which are mandated by leadership. Ironically, the tenets of total quality management center upon control, consistency, and predictability. For quality processes to produce the best products and services, this patriarchal system had to be implemented. Patriarchy does not seem to work as well for human systems as it does for production and the generation of consistently good service. More accurately, the people are being coerced to produce consistent quality by a culture best suited for regulating technical aspects rather than human aspects. Control/consistency/predictability — by-products of bureaucratic hierarchy and quality control — work very well in environments of stability and relative constancy. Most of us do not work in stability and constancy, but we work in an environment of constantly shifting priorities, global competition with flat and flexible organizations, times of rapid change necessitating adaptive and generative changes, and an obsessive focus on the customer as the guiding force for what we do. Even the last stalwart of bureaucracy, the federal government of the United States, has moved forward, creating quality-focused empowered agencies that cut red tape, reducing unnecessary policy and procedures, and becoming more flexible and responsive (Gore, 1993; 1995).

Dobbs (1993) reminded us that, although Brooks International reported in 1991 that 93% of workers do feel responsible for organizational quality and performance, bureaucratic and highly controlled work environments can thwart employee willingness to participate.

Certainly, every organization needs accountability, but all the evidence in the motivational literature indicates that motivation comes from the hearts and minds of people, not from standards procedures and controls. In

other words, there must be an experience of commitment (willingness) internally which "shows up" in the external behavior and the relationships among colleagues. Empowerment, as used here, is that aspect of human potential that is apparent in commitment to the best interests of the organization and supportive relationships among colleagues. Both elements of organizational change, structure and process, must be implemented.

It is simple in principle to structure empowering organizations, but it is the process engaged among human beings that "gets in the way." Values, personalities, and behavior are not accessible to consistent and predictable control, especially in a diverse workforce where values and personality vary even more widely than in a homogeneous sample. The structuring effort is familiar in whole or in part for most who work in contemporary organizations:

> Define vision and values
> Flatten the organizational structure
> Reduce the individual performance appraisal to a feedback mechanism
> Establish self-directed work teams
> Implement team-based, pay-for-performance systems based on profit sharing or gain sharing
>
> (Rigg, 1992)

These structure and mechanism elements above are all designed to forward an empowered workforce collaborating as a vision community. In a forthcoming book, *The Perils of Empowerment*, the author describes many of the elements and pitfalls of the process of empowerment. The largest body of issues emanates from human nature in patriarchy. What we want to see in an empowered environment is stewardship, a sense of ownership and commitment. Unfortunately, patriarchy's (1) harsh sanctions, (2) downsizing, (3) lack of commitment of financial resources to anything other than cash accumulation and cost cutting, and (4) lack of long-term employment security for em-

ployees has left employees just as likely to lack commitment as is demonstrated by short-sighted employers.

Even more so in patriarchy than in other cultures, the parental nature of organizational leadership prompts a very natural "rebellious child" workforce. Since most companies have been steeped in patriarchy for years, the paradigm shift to stewardship is a "big leap." What happens is described by Burkan (1993) as a "paradigm effect," a defense/reaction to that which is hard to accept because it doesn't fit with what is already in place (the current paradigm). Management can leverage paradigm-shifting change through such managerial tools as: culture change programs, employee involvement in problem solving, team development/team action, and rewards for desirable behavior.

The aforementioned tools will only help leverage empowerment if leadership can behave as partners of integrity instead of as parents. This must be in the foreground when processing experiential learning for empowerment. To assist in defraying parental tendencies, the standard fare for a facilitation team at ropes or other outdoor experiential events, is helpful — dress in clothing similar to that of the participants, maybe even facilitator team t-shirts, bandanas, caps, or other tricks familiar to most AEE members. It's also helpful to have some commitments for partnership.

Below is discussed the commitment process in the format for our empowerment design which engages a wide variety of customized modules as dictated by training needs assessments. For the purposes of a generic model of empowerment training, the rest of this paper will discuss IOW's 4-tier model: CONTEXT, COMMUNICATION TOOLS, OUTCOMES, and the use of EXPERIENCES (with examples discussed).

Context

First and essential is a context for training. We use a standard set of commitments which we believe essential for empowered partners. This set of commitments comes from firewalk instructor Tolly Burkan:

Training Context: Five Commitments of Empowerment

1. Take full responsibility for your experience
2. Speak the truth and speak it quickly
3. Ask for what you need when you need it
4. PAY ATTENTION
5. Honor your agreements

We discuss this context for the classroom and the work environment, predicate all interventions and trainings on it, and process and give feedback based on the five commitments. Setting context for this training system requires that these five commitments be discussed and amplified upfront, explaining the importance in the context of the stewardship culture, how it looks or sounds, and striving for zero-defects, blame-free feedback.

Communication Tools

At our place of business, we work the entire empowerment curriculum, modeling and encouraging skills. In modularized training, we find it important to develop certain key skills at the outset. Crucial are the giving and receiving of feedback, acknowledgment, and completion.

In teaching about feedback, we talk about its value, the lack of valence (feedback is neither positive nor negative), and the importance of offering or accepting feedback with the five commitments in mind. The communication skill of acknowledgment is an expression of appreciation for someone's contribution. We teach acknowledgment as a skill with more impact than a simple thanks wherein participants are taught to identify specifically what was done and the difference it made.

The communication skill of completion is a process for taking responsibility for resolving an unresolved issue. It might take the form of an apology or a request for a different way of "doing business" interpersonally or both.

It is possible to create an experience of feedback as part of the instruction. Often when wellness is part of the curriculum, we tape up butcher paper of full-body silhouettes for each participant and structure opportunities for everyone to give each other some feedback in writing on the body trace.

Again all skills are modeled by the instructor and woven into the process work at every opportunity. This is not done artificially, but in the context of what naturally emerges and that is key.

Outcomes

All learning events, formal training classes, organization development interventions, coaching, leadership communication, and consultation are geared to build skilled and values-driven workforce associates who:

Coach and confront each other appropriately
Are clear about mission goals, team contract(s)
Work actively and effectively in teams, both work teams and cross-functional teams
Communicate openly
Trust and respect others
Initiate new ideas
Develop and train each other
Listen actively to colleagues
Align personal and organizational goals
Stay abreast of company or agency business, market shares (for private sector) issues, etc.
Engage in effective/creative problem solving
Seek and implement improvements
Hold each other accountable for productivity
Meet any reasonable request of a colleague
Honor commitments made
Empower and support each other
Generate win-win solutions to issues

The checklist above is the desired learning outcomes list for empowerment training. Something this ambitious takes a long time, and attrition and re-engineering will affect the time-to-completion. The learning team needs to work tirelessly on these outcomes and celebrate even the small successes.

Incidentally, the learning team may be a group other than an intact work group, For instance, a set of regional managers, all of whom are working on building a self-directed workforce in their arena of responsibility. Regardless of the training participants, the work in training focuses on facilitators who "walk their talk" as the process is engaged.

Experiences and the Process

Content-focused trainers beware. The content needs to come from the participants. This type of training requires an incredible presence and leaving the ego behind. Fundamental skills such as feedback, acknowl-edgment, and completion are taught, then put into practice as often as possible. Facilitators set the context, observe, hold accountable, and direct the discussion.

Context-setting reminds everyone of the five commitments and any other key issues (examples — outdoor vermin alert, avoidance of personal discounting remarks, etc.). Then, of course, the creative aspect of "setting up" an outdoor event with fun scenarios is also part of that context.

Observing requires attention to verbal and non-verbals that may go unnoticed by the group. In this environment, facilitators would be looking for inclusion/exclusion of others, team problem solving, leadership which fosters ownership, exhibiting any of the five commitments, use of the communication and feedback skills taught, etc.

Holding participants accountable will not always make it possible to stay out of patriarchy. Facilitators may give feedback "cleanly" and still be

heard as parental. That, of course, only gives opportunities for the demonstration of feedback and completion skills.

Directing the discussion also requires paying attention to opportunities to engage the skills of communication. Part of directing the discussion will be to follow the five commitments and tell some hard truths. Many times in outdoor adventures one must be concerned with safety. Yet except for safety, there are often only encouraging words given, especially when working with at-risk youth groups. This stems in part from the need to foster self-esteem. However, in the corporate or government training context, this author is recommending that you give so-called negative feedback as well. If you have properly established the context for receiving feedback, this will help forward the kind of feedback needed for continuous improvement.

Although one certainly would want to examine what took place for any given experiential challenge and ask for some observations about how people "showed up," empowerment facilitators are looking to the outcomes listed above. Process questions should center upon the outcomes; thus, you might ask after an experiential event:

> From whom did you get coaching?
>
> How does what you did here fit with the company's policy on . . . ? (e.g., 100% on-time delivery)
>
> Where did you see people communicate with respect?
>
> Who held a colleague accountable? Any feedback for the accountability discussion?
>
> Whom do you wish to acknowledge? (Do that.)
>
> Where did you see the five commitments kept? (Which was broken?)

The presenter will demonstrate an event at the conference designed to examine relationships and use the empowerment approach to involve the participants. The event is one of many we engage, to show the learners how to get the most out of their own awarenesses and their own "blind spots." The conference demonstration will use "human sculpting" to show leaders how to build more empowering relationships with their colleagues. In the event, one person will be the focus and choose five or six co-workers to center on. The focal person will describe his/her relationship to each colleague, pick a member of the group to represent the colleague, choose a physical distance that reflects the social distance, ask the person to represent the colleague back home nonverbally and verbally, say something unspoken, have the entire sculpture of five or six speak at once, receive feedback from all, examine commitments and communication skills that need to be improved, and ask for and receive acknowledgment.

Questions will be asked afterwards similar to the examples above. Following that, the facilitator will ask the group to mention activities or events that they think apply to this model and why their event applies.

Conclusion

The truth is we are always empowering with experiential activities. The key in corporate training is to be a model of integrity with regard to what is being asked of others — not an infallible model, just a model.

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